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ABSTRACT

Puerto Ricans in the United States are often assumed to be bilingual, and most are to some degree. Among Puerto Ricans, frequent returns home are common, allowing for immersion in both cultures and communication in both Spanish and English. Despite availability of bilingual education, programs are too short for participants to attain even a moderate level of English proficiency. Puerto Rican language patterns in the United States include a vernacular mix of English and black English, a mix of Spanish and English that is neither language, and English/Spanish code-switching. Low value attached to their own dialect of Spanish, often associated with deviance and ignorance, causes many to avoid its use. In all these cases, Puerto Rican language use is not highly valued in the United States. Children may internalize this view, assign little value to their native tongue, and even abandon it altogether, that may cause further family and community problems. More time should be given to English instruction, but Puerto Rican children should also be allowed to use their own language in appropriate contexts in school.The goal of bilingual education should be to develop proficiency in both languages. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Puerto Rican Language Use:

A Synthesis Paper

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Latinos are fast becoming the largest ethnic minority in the nation. The 1990 census found that nearly one in ten Americans was Latino. Projections find that by the year 2050, one in every five persons may be of Latino descent. These numbers are awesome. In a nation where there is such a diverse population, people must be aware of differences. They must be celebrated and used for the benefit of all. As educators, we must realize that our students will bring many issues into the classroom. These issues must be addressed in a sensitive and proper manner so as to ensure students' self-identity, confidence, and academic achievement.

Demographics

As mentioned above, Latinos are among the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. The young Hispanic population, whose median age of 26 is younger than the non-Hispanic community (de La Rosa Salazar and Perez, 1997), continues to grow quickly. Early in the 21st century, Latinos will be the largest minority in the U.S.

However, this increase in population has not been accompanied by the increase in educational attainment, economic stability, or political power that may be expected (de La Rosa Salazar and Perez, 1997). Concentrated in

populous and urban areas, over 40% of Latinos over the age of 19 do not have a high school diploma. The Hispanic community in the United States is undereducated and two and one half times as likely to be poor as non-Hispanics (de la Rosa Salazar and Perez, 1997). Puerto Ricans are no exception. In fact, among Latino groups "mainland Puerto Ricans tend to have lower levels of education and the poorest economic conditions..." (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1993, p.109).

Latino student enrollment in U.S. public schools is expected to increase by 2.4 million between 1985 and 2000 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1986, as cited in de la Rosa Salazar and Perez, 1997). Furthermore, Latino students will be the largest single ethnic group in total enrollment in several states. These staggering numbers reveal the obligation of educators to properly serve this needy and diverse population of students.

Latino students in the United States bring a rich culture into the classroom- one that often includes the Spanish language. The use of language in the entire Latino community is very complex, and the issue as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, this paper will focus on the language use of Puerto Ricans. As mentioned above, Latinos are increasing rapidly in numbers and it is important

that educators be informed so as to best teach and learn from one group that will be a big presence in the classroom of the future.

Puerto Rican Bilingualism

Oftentimes, Puerto Ricans are assumed to be bilingual. In some respects, this assumption is correct, however a definition of bilingualism is helpful in this discussion. There are several types of bilingualism. Three types are suggested by Diaz-Rico and Weed (1995). Subtractive bilingualism occurs when the native language, in this case Spanish, is replaced by a more dominant and prestigious one, English. Subtractive bilingualism may result in "low levels of academic proficiency in both languages" (p.38). Partial bilingualism does not have any significant cognitive effects. This occurs when native-like levels of proficiency have been reached in either language. Finally, additive bilingualism results in high proficiency levels in both languages. This form of bilingualism is what most people think of when they hear the term. It also results in the most positive cognitive effects.

In the United States today, most Puerto Ricans are bilingual to some degree. Bilingualism in their community is

almost necessary. On a spectrum of English and Spanish, where English monolingualism is at one end, while Spanish monolingualism is at the other, most Puerto Ricans lie somewhere in the middle (Flores, Attinasi, & Pedraza, 1992). They normally fall under one of the three types of bilingualism.

The traditional immigrant pattern of transition from the foreign language to English is not necessarily characteristic of Puerto Ricans on the mainland (Flores, et al., 1992). There are several reasons for this. One is the proximity of the island. Because of the relative ease and inexpensiveness of traveling to and from Puerto Rico, frequent return trips and visits are common. This allows for immersion in two different cultures and languages, making bilingualism very useful.

Besides frequent visits, migrant patterns among Puerto Ricans also contribute to the community's bilingualism (Flores, et al., 1992). For several reasons, mainly employment and family matters, Puerto Ricans move to and from the island often. Connections in both places, most of whom are at different places in the English-Spanish spectrum, require that these migrants be able to communicate with everyone. Again, bilingualism becomes an asset.

The proximity of the island and the migrant patterns make communication needs in the Puerto Rican community great. They may be visiting on the island and speaking Spanish to relatives and friends whose dominant and maybe only language is Spanish. Or they may be looking for a job in the corporate world which requires fluency in both English and Spanish. Back on the mainland, Puerto Ricans may encounter newly arrived friends and family with a limited proficiency in English while they communicate with their friends and immediate family members who may be heading more and more toward English monolingualism. These various but realistic situations, among others, are an example of why bilingualism among Puerto Ricans is not only extremely helpful, but increasingly necessary.

Problems with Bilingual Education

The linguistic diversity of ethnic communities in the United States is awesome. The situation requires that programs be offered that allow all students equal access to knowledge and education. Programs such as bilingual education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)are designed to aid students in learning English. Although an in-depth explanation of all such program models

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is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge them as well as the fact that many Puerto Ricans take part.

One of the most controversial issues surrounding bilingual education today is the length of time necessary to successfully exit students from such programs. Differing views of bilingual education exist. Many believe that its purpose is to exit a student as soon as he/she is able to survive (or swim) in the mainstream. Others believe the goal of bilingual education is to develop both the student's native and second language to the point of equal proficiency or bilingualism. The problem with the first definition is that although exiting students might appear to have adequate second language skills, they may in fact only have basic interpersonal communication skills, or BICS (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 1995). Students may communicate well in social environments and contexts. They may even speak sufficiently well to the teacher in school. However, in most cases, the student will be lacking the cognitive proficiency to succeed academically. This cognitive and academic language proficiency, or CALP (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 1995), has been proven to require a minimum of five to seven years to develop (Cummins as cited in Nieto, 1992). Given these facts, those

bilingual education programs with the goal of exiting students within three or four years are setting the stage for their failure. Consequently, when placed in the mainstream these students are at a great disadvantage and are at risk of failing (or sinking) because they lack the proper language skills. Puerto Rican students often fall into this trap. If they are placed in a quick-exit bilingual education model, they face the chance of failing and/or being assigned to low tracks.

Language Values and Varieties

The language that many Puerto Ricans speak is often looked upon negatively. Many Puerto Ricans in the United States grow up in urban neighborhoods where the language spoken is a vernacular dialect of standard English (Flores, 1992). This dialect is a mix with black English which is socially and academically unacceptable. Therefore, upon entering the educational system, not only do Puerto Rican language minorities struggle to learn English, they often are urged, if not required, to unlearn the only form of that language with which they have become familiar. These experiences with the mixing of so many language varieties become a part of Puerto Rican language.

One manifestation of English and Spanish mixing is the language which derives from the fact that most Puerto Ricans are in the middle of the English-Spanish spectrum. This language has been termed 'Spanglish' - interpenetrating usage of both languages (Flores, 1992). Spanglish can also be defined as the simultaneous Anglicizing of Spanish and Latinizing of English. Spanglish therefore is not a nonstandard language. It is neither English or Spanish nor a dialect of either.

Another manifestation of the mixing of English with Spanish is code-switching, which is directly related to the concept of Spanglish. Code-switching is the "alternating use of two languages on the word, phrase, clause or sentence level" (Valdes-Fallis, 1978 as cited in Diaz-Rico and Weed, 1995). There is a considerable amount of research in this area on both sides of the issue. In general, early work on code-switching views the practice as detrimental to the switchers and the languages between which they switch. Flores, Attinasi and Pedraza (1992) cite this view of code-switching:

> *Code switching is viewed as the tragic convergence of two nonstandard vernaculars, and thus is assumed to epitomize the collapse of the integrity of both. [It]amounts to contamination and interference, an easy recourse to compensate for incomplete resources in either idiom (pp. 164-165).*

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More recent research has found that the purposes of code-switching are many and more complicated than simple deficient monolingualism (Zentella, 1997). Diaz-Rico and Weed (1995) list ten purposes of code-switching, only two of which are related to lack of linguistic knowledge. In fact, the empirical and theoretical study of Flores, et al. (1993) found that code-switching allowed for more potential in communication as well as in expression. Certain things can be said in one language, but when translated completely lose their meaning. This often being the case in the Spanish dialect, Puerto Ricans code-switch for purposes of meaning of expression.

Another aspect of code-switching recently researched is the significant syntactic knowledge displayed by switchers (Flores and Yudice, 1997; Poplack, 1979 as cited in Zentella, 1997). When bilingual speakers switch between languages, they follow the syntactic and grammatical rules of both. This demonstrates exceptional knowledge of both languages, not a lack thereof. When Puerto Ricans employ these techniques, it needs to be understood that there is a complicated situation behind it. They do not just switch because of a lack of English or Spanish.

Puerto Rican language use may also be affected by the value attached to their language. Puerto Ricans speak a dialect of Spanish- a mix of Spanish, indigenous and African languages. It is very distinguishable from the Spanish spoken in Spain and countries of Central and South America. Some people view a language difference as inferior. That is the case here. Spanish speakers in the United States are looked upon differently depending on the dialect's ethnic origin and class position (Walsh, 1991). Speakers of the Puerto Rican dialect are not given as much importance or prestige as speakers of Spanish from Spain. The Spanish in Puerto Rico is not considered faithful to the mother tongue and is associated with deviance and ignorance (Flores et al., 1992).

The fact is that Puerto Rican language, be it Spanish, English or 'Spanglish' is not highly valued in the United States. Puerto Ricans, especially children, may internalize this dominant view and assign very little value to their native tongue. As a result they may decide to drop their native Spanish and speak only English, which is more prestigious and advantageous. This in turn may lead to other problems with family or cultural identity later in life.

Language, Culture, and Self- Identification

Language, culture, and self-identification are linked in very complex ways. There is no doubt that learning a second language, particularly English in the United States, is socially and economically advantageous. However, oftentimes people equate learning another language, mainly the dominant one, with cultural denial and/or betrayal. This belief can lead to problems with language acquisition (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1993).

Here is where the debate on assimilation vs. acculturation becomes important. These two terms are different, though many do not realize it. To assimilate is to become absorbed into the dominant culture, thereby losing one's own cultural identity (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 1995). Acculturation on the other hand, is an additive process whereby one adapts to the dominant culture but retains the native culture and his/her right to participate in it. Because language is an inextricable part of culture, it becomes a key component in this debate.

Puerto Ricans seem to be divided over this issue. In a language attitude survey, Flores et al. (1993) found no conflict between being Puerto Rican and speaking English. Zentella (1997) also found that 91% of the bilingual teens

studied in Puerto Rico agreed that one can be Puerto Rican even if he/she speaks only English.

Although the literature reviewed supported the above-mentioned view, there are those people who are adamant about Puerto Rican identity and language. Zentella (1997) quotes a letter to a Spanish newspaper that reveals the other side of the argument.

> *...nor are the 500,000 born, raised, and educated in New York, Puerto Ricans even if they go to 100,000 Puerto Rican parades, live 100 years in Puerto Rico, or if their parents were lucky enough to have been born on this enchanted island. Accept reality: if you were born, raised, and educated in the United States, you are American and not Puerto Rican. You are also a New Yorker (p. 306).*

Whether or not a Puerto Rican speaks Spanish, assimilation or acculturation can play a role in forming self-identity. The truth is that the acquisition of English in the United States is a step toward social advance. It is considered an asset while the native language is a marker and important component of culture (Flores, 1992). Zentella (1997) found that Puerto Rican students want to learn English. They consider it important. It is needed for communication, which is the fundamental role of language (Banks, 1994).

Certainly there are many other issues regarding language, culture, and self-identity, but they are beyond the scope of this paper. The point I wish to make is that a great controversy exists in the Puerto Rican community regarding language. This invariably affects language use among Puerto Ricans and their children, something of which educators should be aware.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

The literature shows that the number of Latinos in the U.S. is increasing and will continue to do so in years to come (de La Rosa Salazar and Perez, 1997). It also shows that many of these Latinos are school-age children who attend urban public schools. These students span a range of linguistic abilities including English and Spanish monolingualism and many forms of bilingualism in between.

For those students requiring it, bilingual educators must be made more accountable for teaching students the skills they need to succeed academically as well as socially in the mainstream. Therefore, time must be given to them, and emphasis must be taken away from quick exit program models.

Because not all Puerto Rican students need bilingual education, it is important that educators know the different language varieties that exist in the Latino community. They must allow children to use their own language in appropriate contexts in school. Their voices must be heard (Darder, 1997; Ruiz, 1997; Walsh, 1991). A child's language, no matter what it is, must never be devalued. He/she must be allowed to express his/her voice. Bringing the students' language into the classroom and incorporating their voices will help empower them (Ruiz, 1997).

A child's culture may also be brought into the classroom. Teachers can use parents in this endeavor (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 1995). This practice will allow for teachers and other students to learn about the Puerto Rican community. It will also demonstrate the teacher's willingness to involve parents and children in the school. Working in this way will ensure that the students' culture is valued.

The goal of bilingual education should be to develop students who are proficient in two languages. Puerto Rican students, whether or not they are in bilingual education, have something great to offer. Knowing two languages is an advantage. As educators, we should make it our goal to work along with Puerto Rican students so that they leave our

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classrooms with more than what they entered them - never less.

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